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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BELGRADE 000275

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SUBJECT: VOJVODINA SERBIAN ORTHODOX BISHOP SAYS CHURCH NEEDS TO  
FOCUS MORE ON ECUMENICAL ISSUES

REFS: A) Belgrade 217, B) 08 Belgrade 1217, C) 08 Belgrade 1123, D)  
08 Belgrade 904

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#### Summary

1. (SBU) Bishop Irinej Bulovic, Serbian Orthodox Bishop of Novi Sad and Backa in Vojvodina, spoke to the Ambassador March 25 about the future of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Irinej highlighted the importance of electing a new Patriarch and reaching out to other religious communities. Irinej's willingness to open dialogue with ethnic Albanians in Kosovo is positive, and he could be a valuable partner in emphasizing the everyday needs of people in Kosovo. End Summary.

#### Patriarch is Essential

2. (SBU) Bishop Irinej, Bishop of Novi Sad and Backa in Serbia's autonomous province of Vojvodina, said the decision whether to elect a new Patriarch with current Patriarch Pavle still ill and unable to fulfill his duties (Ref A) was a major issue for the Serbian Orthodox Church. Irinej said the Bishops were divided and had thus chosen the status quo at the last Assembly meeting, rejecting Pavle's resignation (Ref B). Irinej said it was difficult for the Church not to have an acting head, as the Patriarch's actions and statements had much more force than those of any other Church official. Irinej, who is considered a strong contender to replace Pavle (Ref C), said the Church needed a functioning Patriarch in order to confront the financial crisis and other challenges facing society, and that as a result the Bishops should choose a new Patriarch at the next Assembly meeting in May. Irinej added that the Patriarch was ready to resign, so there would be no obstacles to choosing his replacement. Irinej believed, however, that head of the Holy Synod Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Coastlands would successfully block efforts to replace Pavle, leaving the Church in its state of uncertainty.

#### Cooperation with Other Religious Communities

3. (SBU) Irinej pointed to good relations between the many ethnic groups and religions in Vojvodina as an example of the Church's important role in society. He said different ethnic groups had a long tradition of a common life throughout Vojvodina's history and cooperated well. The Church cooperated with other religious communities and shared many programs, such as a joint religious television program different communities took turns hosting.

¶4. (SBU) Dialogue with other religious communities in Kosovo was also necessary to preserve the Church's heritage in Kosovo and improve the life of Orthodox Serbs there, but there were numerous obstacles, according to Irinej. Bishop Artemije of Raska and Prizren (the diocese that includes Kosovo) opposed any cooperation with ethnic Albanians (Ref D) because he was still embittered by the destruction to Kosovo Orthodox churches and monasteries in 2004. Irinej, who pointed out that Serbs had also destroyed mosques during that time, said that he and Metropolitan Amfilohije planned a meeting to try to convince Artemije to be open to cooperation. Another obstacle to dialogue was that Muslim Albanians had a similar psychological block about dealing with the Church, according to Irinej. Irinej pointed to initial difficulties, since overcome, in developing an interreligious council in Bosnia-Herzegovina as an example of what could be achieved in Kosovo in the future.

Bio Note

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¶5. (SBU) Born Mirko Bulovic on February 11, 1947 in Backa, Serbia, Bishop Irinej completed school in Sombor in 1965 and graduated from the Theological Faculty of the Serbian Orthodox Church in 1969. Patriarch Pavle, then Bishop of Raska and Prizren, ordained Irinej, who went on to teach at Ostrog Monastery in Montenegro. Bishop Irinej completed his post-graduate studies at Athens University's Theological Faculty. He also studied at the Russian Orthodox Institute of St. Serge in Paris and at the Theological Faculty in Belgrade University. In 1989, he was elected as Patriarch German's vicar (assistant). On December 24, 1990, he was appointed Bishop for the Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Novi Sad and Backa in Vojvodina. Widely considered the Orthodox Church's leading intellectual, Bishop Irinej has published extensively, and for ten years he edited the popular magazine Orthodox Missionary published by the Holy Synod

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of Bishops. He is considered a contender, though not the front-runner, to succeed current, ailing Patriarch Pavle.

Comment

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¶6. (SBU) Bishop Irinej's focus on the well-being of the Church's believQVg